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Materiality and the Limits to Free Political Action: Sartre and Arendt

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It's regrettable that neither Hannah Arendt nor Jean-Paul Sartre attended seriously to the ideas of the other. For of all the thinkers within the phenomenological tradition they are surely the two with the most profound passion for politics; and they are two who developed the most sustained reflections on the world of politics. They are also both, par excellence, philosophers of *action*. They both investigate the conditions for free and meaningful action, and they seek to understand why it is so elusive in the modern world. Thus, in spite of their lack of interest in each other's works, I have chosen in this paper to engage them in what I hope will be a productive encounter with each other. In particular, I propose to explore what we might learn from such an encounter about the significance – and the difficulties --- of forms of direct political participation. For a growing body of recent work in political theory and philosophy criticizes extant forms of representative government, and extols the virtues of direct citizen participation.[1]

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Both Arendt's *The Human Condition* [1958] and *Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason* [1960] offer extended meditations on the relationship of freedom to necessity, and both thinkers affirm, each in her or his own way, the persistence of human freedom even in what Arendt calls „dark times."[2] Furthermore, they both share the fundamental insight, that human activities are mediated by the world of material things, a world which we ourselves create from the resources of nature, through a multitude of

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[1] Some of the more recent advocates of more participatory politics include: Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; Ben Barber, *Strong Democracy*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984; Jeffrey Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998; Andrew Arato and Jean Cohen, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992; Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. Cited in the text hereafter as HC; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, London: New Left Books, 1976 (French original, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969). Cited in the text hereafter as CDR.

practices. However, for the later Sartre, such mediations lead generally to a *loss* of freedom, while for Arendt they *enable* free action to take place. „Reification," that is, the materialization of human activity in tangible objects, represents for Sartre (like Marx) an alienation of our activity, but for Arendt its positive expression (HC 139-40).

There is, for Sartre, a „primitive type of alienation" of praxis, which is logically prior to the more complex forms of alienation that arise from such social relations as class conflict (CDR 124). For Sartre, the objects we create through praxis act back against us coercively. What he calls "practico-inert" entities produce in us their own demands. They drain our freedom from us as they coerce our future activities. Whenever we act, we interiorize the inertness of worked matter as our own. For example, for a house to remain habitable and meet our need for shelter, we must endlessly meet its demands. It must be „heated, swept, repainted, etc; otherwise it deteriorates. This *vampire object* [my emphasis] constantly absorbs human action"(CDR 169).

By contrast, although it *can* be made to encroach on our freedom, Arendt sees the world of material things that we create as *fundamentally* benign and supportive. Indeed, it is what makes a truly human life possible. She observes: "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it" (HC 42); and elsewhere she remarks: „without being at home in the midst of things whose durability makes them fit for use, and for erecting a world whose very permanence stands in direct contrast to life, this life would never be human" (HC 134-5).

Thus, materiality is not only a quality of tangible things but, for both thinkers, also bears crucially on social relations. For Sartre, the human relations (the „social ensembles" as he calls them) that arise from our multiple praxes are most often negatively mediated by materiality. And they are shaped not only by the "primitive alienation" that arises from worked matter but also by the fact that – at least in our history so far – we always act within a material field of scarcity. Within this field, we encounter the praxis of others above all as the *alteration* of our own – as draining away our freedom. Consequently, human bonds generally become forms of what Sartre calls "antagonistic reciprocity": as conscious subjects we reciprocally experience each other as threat. We are for each other a "demonic double"(CDR 132). Each is – and recognizes her/himself to be – altered by others and to alter them, in the indefinite chain of alienating relationships that Sartre calls "seriality." For Arendt, on the contrary, although it may become distorted, our sociality is the very condition of freedom, that is of action. „Action is never possible in isolation . . . Action and speech are surrounded by and in constant contact with the web of acts and words of other men"(HC 188). Indeed, it is such socially embedded action that is the source of the highest pleasures and most meaningful aspects of human existence.

In *The Human Condition* Arendt is at pains to distinguish several different kinds

of activity which Sartre (equally deliberately) groups together under the single term, "*praxis*." For Sartre, praxis consists in all and any *intentional* human activity. However constrained and alienated, we may still say that praxis is „free," in that it is not determined but rather, „creates its own law" as „a mediation between the given, past objectivity and the [new] objectification which is to be produced" (CDR 549). But for Arendt, it is important sharply to differentiate the three domains of human activity that she calls, respectively, „labor," „work," and „action"; and it is central to her critique of Marx (and by implication of a thinker such as Sartre) that he elides them.

For Arendt, „action" has a particular quality -- freedom -- which *labor* and *work* both lack. Labor, Arendt argues, is concerned with the immediate reproduction of human life, the realm of pure necessity, and it produces the things needed for instant consumption in an endless cyclicity. She distinguishes work, both phenomenologically and functionally, from labor, for it involves the skilled fabrication of those *durable* objects that are necessary for the stability and endurance of the human world. But while both labor and work are necessary dimensions of human existence and each may be, in its own way, meaningful to its doer, neither is the site of freedom. Only what Arendt calls *action* is, she insists, a wholly free undertaking -- and she argues that key to its freedom is that (unlike labor and work) it is *independent* of materiality, and so of necessity. Thus, she asserts, "action . . . . goes on *directly* between men *without the intermediary of things or matter*."(HC 7; my emphases).

For Arendt, the necessary site of action is public political space. It is here that the self may bring itself into being as it discloses itself before others. „In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world . . . this revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore when people are *with* others and neither for nor against them -- that is in *sheer human togetherness*" (HC 179-80; emphases added). For Arendt, politics at its best, (as in the participatory politics of the Greek polis) is par excellence the domain of freedom: that is, it is the domain of self-creating action unbound by necessity and materiality.

But Sartre's account of praxis in the *Critique* puts into question Arendt's claims that action is so radically different from labor and work. For Sartre demonstrates that all human praxis takes place somewhere along a continuum of *degrees* of freedom and of its alienation (or alteration) through its practico-inert mediations. Thus, he argues, even the most *coerced* labor does not constitute a total annihilation of human freedom. Conversely, even the most free action, (that of the spontaneous coming-together and cooperation of what he calls the "group-in-fusion"), is still conditioned by the exigencies of worked matter. In his extended example of a group-in-fusion, the group which stormed the Bastille during the French Revolution, Sartre shows how the layout of the city, the physical form of the Bastille itself, the kind of weapons available, etc., as well as the threat from the surrounding soldiers, all re-entered, constrained, and

altered "free" praxis.

Through a multiplicity of examples and historical cases, Sartre show us why Arendt's insistence that „action . . . goes on *directly* between men *without the intermediary of things or matter*" (HC 7; emphases added) is problematic. Thus, as I show next, he better enables us to account for the always temporary nature of those „spaces of freedom," of those spaces of direct political "action," which, in *On Revolution*, Arendt refers to as the "council system."

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In *On Revolution* [1963][3] Arendt interprets modern European and American history through the lenses she had developed in *The Human Condition*. What Arendt celebrates, above all, is the spontaneous emergence of those „spaces of freedom" where „action" may take place. In the fevered constitution-writing and the intense early town meetings of America, and in the neighborhood organizations and political clubs of Paris, politics as free action emerged. Here were forms of politics in which citizens participated directly, and where they did not abnegate their freedom to so-called representatives. Here, the very process of political participation involved the meaningful self-creation and disclosure of self to others that Arendt calls freedom.

In the final chapter, entitled „The Revolutionary Tradition and Its Lost Treasures," Arendt notes and celebrates the fact that similar spaces of freedom, what she refers to as the instances of the "council system," have repeatedly continued to erupt across history. They sprung up in the Paris Commune of 1871, in self-creating soviets in Russia in 1905 and 19I7, in neighborhood councils and student groups in Hungary in 1956, and she -- rightly -- anticipates they will continue to do so. What Arendt values in the council system is the spontaneous emergence of forms of face-to-face deliberation and decision making that others have called direct, or participatory, democracy. Councils are, she says, what „we could also call spaces of appearance"(OR 275). They are spaces for self-creating and self-disclosing action among equals of the kind that Arendt believes makes us most human. These spaces are the instantiation of what (in *The Human Condition*) she had called „sheer human togetherness" (HC 179-80).

But, in none of the great revolutions did freedom last. Instead, „necessity," recolonized the spaces of freedom. This happened, Arendt explains, through failures of leadership and, above all, through the use of the political arena to pursue inappropriate „social" ends -- to protect wealth, or to end poverty. In the case of America, it lead to

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[3] Hannah Arendt, On Revolution, New York: Viking Penguin, 1963. Cited in the text hereafter as OR.

the pursuit of *private* happiness, the emergence of party politics, and corruption; in the cases of France and Russia, to Terror. For, as sites of continuous action, the councils also threatened the revolutionary movements from which they were spawned. This is because „the revolutionary spirit was not merely the spirit of beginning something new but of starting something permanent and enduring . . . From which it *unfortunately* [my emphasis] seems to follow that nothing threatens the achievements of revolutions more dangerously and more acutely than the spirit which has brought them about"(OR 232).

„Unfortunate," indeed. But it is surely not *merely* a matter of bad fortune, or chance. Arendt offers a series of *ad hominem* explanations for the failure of revolutions to sustain free action. She blames such great revolutionary leaders as Jefferson, Robespierre, Marx and Lenin for a lack of vision. They all failed to envision and foster the appropriate *institutional* forms for the perpetuation of "action," she claims; and so they brought about the loss of the greatest "treasures" of the revolutionary tradition.

Beyond such *ad hominem* explanations, Arendt attributes the lamentable, but apparently inevitable, destruction of spaces of freedom to the domination of revolutions by what she calls „*the social question*," or by „necessity." In every case the alleviation of want, or demands to address material needs and interests, have displaced the pursuit of freedom as a good. This displacement seems to be inevitable, she implies, since the poor cannot but be concerned about material questions. Yet, for Arendt (unlike Sartre) need is still is presented as an unfortunate *side-issue*, one that causes revolutions to deviate from their "proper" purpose. But, as Sartre so clearly demonstrates in the *Critique*, need is not a side-issue, and freedom never escapes the exigencies of material existence. It here that Sartre's analyses may take us beyond Arendt's.

Sartre shares with Arendt not only the valuation of human freedom as a supreme good, but also her distrust of centralized and bureaucratized political institutions. He shares, moreover, her appreciation of direct political participation as providing spaces for human freedom. In his paradigmatic account of such participation, the group-in-fusion that storms the Bastille, all initially find their own praxis returned to them augmented. Their freedom is now affirmed, and not negated, in their common project. But the group-in-fusion is only possible within and, in that sense, still is *conditioned* by a particular material field. Thus, if it is to endure beyond the initial moment of fusion it cannot avoid re-interiorizing its exigencies. Once it has stormed the Bastille the group discovers that, if it to survive, it must divide up the tasks of manning the weapons, must organize look-outs, arrange supplies of food from outside, and so on. Moreover, the group has also to police itself, to ensure that each performs their assigned task, and that none defects. It is with these last exigencies that violence, or the threat of violence, reenters the group. All institutions that endure, from clubs to the state, must exert coercive tendencies back against their members, Sartre argues.

Similar tendencies, of course, exist in the spaces of freedom which Arendt considers, as well as in more contemporary spaces of direct political participation.

Whether the event is storming the Bastille or forming an anti-war demonstration, occupying a factory, forming a worker's committee, calling a town meeting, organizing a boycott, occupying a polluting power-station, or participating in a consciousness-raising group, the same question is posed: why cannot the group *endure* as an (as it were) "uncontaminated" site for free political action? Sartre's analyses of the repenetration of the group by the exigencies of the practico-inert does much to explain why Arendt's vision, of free political action as wholly unmediated by material necessity, is misguided; and *why* she is unable adequately to analyze the failures she laments. Contra Arendt, he shows us why action *cannot* take place "without the intermediary of things or matter" (HC 7).

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Sartre's analysis is profoundly sobering. Of course, even the most committed advocates of direct, participatory politics realize that there are enormous "external" obstacles to its instantiation. These include the over-bearing power of the state, and of other great organs of massification, such as the market economy and the media. Like Arendt, they may also consider the problems of unimaginative leadership, or the corrupting effects of personal self-interest or greed. But Sartre tells us that there is more: there is also a logic "internal" to collective action itself, one that must reintroduce seriality and reification into groups that survive more than momentarily.

But although Sartre demonstrates why free political action may never transcend its material mediations, and although he explains why the reintroduction of inertia and seriality back into group actions are unavoidable, still we do not have to take from his account a wholly pessimistic reading of the possibility of freedom in the world. Indeed -- and this is the final moment of the encounter between Sartre and Arendt that I have been staging -- Arendt (briefly and in passing) perhaps suggests why. Near the end of *On Revolution* she suggest that "councils" (that is, the spaces of direct, face-to-face action) may be "the best instruments, for example, for breaking up the modern mass society, with its dangerous tendency toward the formation of pseudo-political mass movements"(OR 279). One may read Arendt here as saying, like Sartre, that we should not hope to "achieve" or to "arrive at" a permanent *condition* of direct participation. For it cannot be stably institutionalized. Instead, we should acknowledge that direct participation is by its nature necessarily episodic: particular instances will either dissolve or undergo reification. Collectively, however, as they come and go they do constitute an ongoing force of contestation. At their best, and indeed precisely *because* they are intrinsically so fleeting, they may keep open possibilities for freedom -- perhaps even in our own "dark times."